

Nissim Kohen's Family



This is a photo of Rosh Hashanah in 1934. The photo shows my parents Sarina and Mihael Kohen. I am next to my father and in front of him is my younger brother Albert Kohen. It was taken in Sofia in the neighboring yard.

My father Mihael Kohen tried many things in life. He spent eight years in captivity during World War I. He was held captive by the French army near Thessaloniki as a soldier from the Bulgarian army. After that he worked as a tinsman. He took part in the construction of the roof of the first building of the Sofia University. He traded with second-hand products. Later, together with an uncle of my mother's Chelebi Haravon, and with the active help of my uncle Mois Haravon, he managed to set up a haberdashery on Lomska Street [present-day George Washington Street, near the central Sofia synagogue], but those were the years of the great crisis in 1929-1932 and he was forced to close it down. Then he started work as a street vendor and walked around the neighborhood with a tray selling elastic cords, tights and haberdashery. Then he made a warehouse selling coal near our house. At that time people could not afford to buy a lot of coal and came to buy 5-10 kilos. In this way my father was able to support us and helped the people in the neighborhood. That continued until the passing of the anti-Jewish laws when he was forbidden to work.

My mother had a hard life. She had two more boys after me, but they died. My first brother Leon was born in 1927 but he died of diphtheria in 1933. In 1929 my second brother Albert was born. He died in 1934.

My mother was clever and hard-working. She read books in Ladino. I think she got the books from acquaintances. At home we had Bulgarian literature, which we took from the community houses.

There was a Jewish community house on Klementina Boulevard [present-day Stamboliiski Blvd] and on Lege Str. I also took books from the Bulgarian community house on the corner of Tsar Simeon Str. and Bregalnitsa Str. Its name was 'Hristo Botev'. Thanks to my mother I learned to read a little in Ladino in Rashi. She had a beautiful handwriting and expressed herself very well. Her Bulgarian was also very good. Uncle Mois Haravon also expressed himself very well. He wrote to us very good letters in Bulgarian from Israel.

Jewish traditions were strictly observed in our family. On Sabbath my father did not go to work. My mother did not light a fire and prepared the meals on Thursday or Friday. According to the Jewish tradition you are not allowed to work and should not allow your cattle or your slave to work on Sabbath. Sabbath is for all. In the winter when it was very cold my mother cleaned the stove and filled it with coal. Then she asked a neighbor who was not a Jew or a passer-by to come and light the fire. The Jewish rites were strictly observed. We did not mix milk and meat meals. At home we had separate cutlery for meat and for milk. We also had separate dishes for Pesach. Before the holiday we cleaned the house thoroughly and whitewashed the walls. The children received presents. Presents were also made on Purim and Rosh Hashanah.